

# Stage Buzz

What's New in New York City Theatre

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## Review - Fritz and Froyim (Turtle Shell Productions)

*Stage Buzz Review by Byrne Harrison*

I will admit, I'm a sucker for a clever concept. And *Fritz and Froyim*, the new musical by Norman Beim with music by Mark Barkan and Rolf Barnes, certainly has one. What would happen if a former SS officer were haunted by the ghost of a holocaust victim - not just any victim, but a comedian and nightclub performer? In this case, the answer is cabaret. But unlike other musicals featuring Nazis and cabarets, this one takes a very broad and comic approach. While I would argue that it doesn't always work, it certainly is a bold experiment.

The play starts on a strong note with the entrance of Tracy Stark, the music director and sardonic narrator of the play. Martini in hand, she lets the audience know that it's in for an unusual night of theatre. As if to prove the point, Fritz (T.J. Mannix) is introduced wearing a Nazi uniform and holding a ventriloquist's dummy, Froyim, who looks like a Jewish concentration camp prisoner. They run through a series of groan-worthy Hitler jokes (okay, some of them are pretty funny). This, of course, is Fritz in 1968. How he went from a dashing German officer with a lovely wife to a lonely middle-aged ventriloquist is the meat of the show. Told primarily in flashback, the audience gets to see the first visitation of Froyim (Matthew Hardy) and how his arrival led to the loss of everything that Fritz held dear. Will Fritz come to terms with the past and settle his inner and outer demons? Well, I found the play to be a little unclear on that aspect, but it makes for an interesting journey.

Since the show is presented as a cabaret performance, I expected the acting to be over-the-top. Well, not Fritz, since he is mostly participating in a cabaret that isn't of his own choosing, but certainly the other characters. Several of the actors play broad to great effect. Most noteworthy in this respect are Joan Barber and Richard B. Watson. Both excel at broad comedy, but are also capable of giving subtle, nuanced performances when their roles call for it. Both Mannix and Hardy give good performances, though Mannix could do more to differentiate between the young and in-control Fritz and the broken man he becomes. His Fritz seems never to age, and more importantly, never really seems to change very much, despite it being important to the show that he does. Hardy seems a little subdued as Froyim; the role would benefit from a touch of Harpo Marx. Rounding out the cast are the lovely Erin Cronican and expressive Dennis Holland, both of whom do a good job with their various roles.

As is expected from Norman Beim, the dialogue is strong and several of his lyrics, those for "People are Anxious to Hear What's New" and "I Keep a Kosher Home" in particular, are excellent. However, for each hit, there is a miss, with some of the songs seeming forced, especially when the topic turns to love. Despite this, Barkan and Barnes' music is wonderful, and while I don't think that every song needs to stay in the show, it's hard not to enjoy listening to them.

While this is neither the strongest of Beim's shows I've seen, nor the strongest show produced by Turtle Shell Productions, if you find the concept intriguing I would suggest seeing *Fritz and Froyim* before it ends its limited run.

Books and Lyrics by Norman Beim  
Music by Mark Barkan and Rolf Barnes  
Directed by John W. Cooper  
Musical Direction by Tracy Stark  
Choreography by Cheryl Cutlip  
General Manager: Jeremy Handelman  
Dramaturge: Scott McCrea  
Stage Manager: Sarah-Dakotah Farney  
Costume Designer: A. Christina Giannini  
Set Designer: Ryan Scott  
Lighting Designer: Eric Larson  
Sound Designer: Scott Sexton  
Technical Director: Jason Shrier  
Assistant Choreographer: AC Jermyn

Featuring Joan Barber (Chorus/Anna/Trudi Miller), Erin Cronican (Chorus/Elsa/Secretary), Matthew Hardy (Froyim), Dennis Holland (Chorus/Mayor/Mr. Berger/Father Dominicus/Dr. Schmidt), T.J. Mannix (Fritz), Tracy Stark (Narrator), and Richard B. Watson (Chorus/Eric/Gunther Sachs/Dr. Sigmund).

The Turtle's Shell Theater  
300 W. 43rd Street, 4th Floor

Through June 16th

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